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METHOD OF INJECTING LIFT GAS INTO A PRODUCTION TUBING OF
AN OIL WELL AND GAS LIFT FLOW CONTROL DEVICE FOR USE IN
THE METHOD

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

The invention relates to a method of injecting lift
gas into a production conduit of an oil well via one or
more gas lift flow control devices and to a gas lift flow
control device for use in the method.

It is common practice to pump lift gas into the
annulus between a production tubing and surrounding well
casing and to pump the lift gas subsequently into the
production tubing from the annulus via one or more one
way gas lift flow control devices in side pockets that
are distributed along the length of the production
tubing. The lift gas which is injected through the flow
control devices into the crude oil (or other fluid)
stream in the production conduit reduces the density of
the fluid column in the production conduit and enhances
the crude oil production rate of the well.

Commercially available gas lift flow control devices
typically use one way check valves which comprise a ball
or hemisphere or cone which is pressed against a valve
seating ring by a spring. If the lift gas pressure is
higher than the pressure of the crude oil stream in the
production conduit then this pressure difference exceeds
the forces exerted to the ball by the spring so that the
spring is compressed and the ball is lifted, or moved
away, from the valve seating ring and lift gas is
permitted to flow from the gas filled injection conduit
into the production conduit. If however the pressure of

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the crude oil stream is higher than the lift gas pressure in the injection conduit, the accumulated forces of the spring and the pressure difference across the gas lift flow control device push the ball or hemisphere against the ring shaped seat, thereby closing the check valve and preventing crude oil, or other fluid, to flow from the production conduit into the injection conduit.

A problem with the known check valves is that the ball or hemisphere and ring-shaped valve seat are exposed to the flux of lift gas, which may contain liquids or sand or other abrasive particles and/or corrosive chemical components, such as hydrogen sulfide and carbon dioxide. The ball or hemisphere and valve seat are therefore subject to mechanical and chemical erosion, which may result in leakage of the valve, so that crude oil or other fluids may flow into the injection conduit from the production conduit, and may block further lift gas injection when the crude oil, or other fluid, level in the injection conduit has reached the location of the gas lift flow control device or flow control devices.

US patent 5,535,828 discloses a surface controlled gas lift valve which is retrievably inserted in a side pocket in the production tubing of an oil well, wherein a frustoconical valve body is mounted on a hydraulically actuated piston which can be actuated from surface to press the valve body against a frustoconical valve seat and to lift the valve body from the valve seat. The valve body and valve seat are exposed to the flux of lift gas and subject to mechanical and chemical erosion.

It is known from US patent 5,004,007 to provide a surface controlled chemical injection valve, wherein a flapper type valve body and associated ring-shaped valve seat are protected from exposure to the flux of injected

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chemicals by a protective sleeve that is pushed by hydraulic pressure through the ring-shaped valve seat and which is pushed back by a spring once the hydraulic pressure has decreased below a threshold level, thereby permitting the flapper type valve body to swing against the ring-shaped valve seat. The known chemical injection valve is equipped with a flow restriction connected to the valve housing and a piston, which is actuated by the pressure difference across the flow restriction. The piston is arranged in a cylindrical cavity in the valve housing adjacent to the sleeve and is connected to the sleeve. The piston serves to overcome frictional forces between the sleeve and any seals between the sleeve and valve housing and the presence of the piston adjacent to the sleeve makes the valve complex, expensive and prone to failure if contaminants, sand or abrasive particles accumulate in the cylindrical cavity above the piston, and/or if the seals fail.

The complex design of the surface controlled chemical injection valve renders it unsuitable to replace the known wear prone spring actuated ball valves.

It is an object of the present invention to provide an improved lift gas injection method in which use is made of one or more gas lift flow control devices, which have a minimum of wear prone movable parts, so that the flow control devices are cost effective and wear resistant.

It is a further object of the present invention to provide a wear resistant gas lift flow control device, which can be made and operated easily and in a cost-effective manner.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

In accordance with the invention there is provided a method of injecting lift gas into a production conduit of an oil well via one or more downhole gas lift flow control devices which each comprise:

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- a tubular valve housing comprising a flow passage having an upstream end which is connected to a lift gas supply conduit and a downstream end which is connected to the interior of the production conduit;

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- a flapper type valve body which is pivotally connected to the valve housing and is arranged in the flow passage such that if the valve body is pivoted in the open position the valve body is oriented substantially parallel to the flow passage and that if the valve body is pivoted in the closed position the valve body is oriented substantially perpendicular to the flow passage and is pressed against a ring shaped valve seat, thereby blocking passage of fluids through the flow passage;

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- a valve protection sleeve which is slidably arranged in the flow passage between a first position wherein the sleeve extends through the ring-shaped valve seat, whilst the valve body is pivoted in the open position thereof, thereby protecting the valve seat and valve body against wear by the flux of lift gas or other fluids and a second position wherein the sleeve extends through the section of the flow passage upstream of the valve seat, whilst the valve body is pivoted in the closed position thereof; and

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- a flow restrictor forming part of the valve protection sleeve, which is dimensioned such that the flux of lift gas or other fluids flowing through the flow

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restrictor creates a difference in pressure which induces the sleeve to move towards the first position.

The invention also relates to a gas lift flow control device for injecting lift gas or other fluids into a production conduit of an oil well, comprising:

- a tubular valve housing comprising a flow passage having an upstream end which is configured to be connected to a lift gas supply conduit and a downstream end which is configured to be connected to the interior of the production conduit;

- a flapper type valve body which is pivotally connected to the valve housing and is arranged in the flow passage such that if the valve body is pivoted in the open position the valve body is oriented substantially parallel to the flow passage and that if the valve body is pivoted in the closed position the valve body is oriented substantially perpendicular to the flow passage and is pressed against a ring shaped valve seat, thereby blocking passage of fluids through the flow passage;

- a valve protection sleeve which is slidably arranged in the flow passage between a first position wherein the sleeve extends through the ring-shaped valve seat, whilst the valve body is pivoted in the open position thereof, thereby protecting the valve seat and valve body against wear by the flux of lift gas or other fluids and a second position wherein the sleeve extends through the section of the flow passage upstream of the valve seat, whilst the valve body is pivoted in the closed position thereof; and

- a flow restrictor forming part of the valve protection sleeve, which is dimensioned such that the flux of lift gas or other fluids flowing through the flow

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restrictor creates a difference in pressure which induces the sleeve to move towards the first position.

5 Preferably, the sleeve has a tapered section where the outer diameter of the sleeve is gradually reduced in downstream direction of the sleeve and a first flexible sealing ring is arranged in the housing upstream of the valve seat, such that the outer surface of the tapered section of the sleeve is pressed against the inner surface of the sealing ring when the sleeve is in the first position thereof, thereby providing a fluid tight seal in the annular space between the tapered section of the sleeve and the tubular valve housing when the sleeve is in the first position thereof and such that said first sealing ring only loosely engages the tapered section of the sleeve when the sleeve is in the second position thereof.

The tapered section also serves to centralize the sleeve in the valve body as it moves to the first position from the second position.

20 Alternatively, the tubular valve housing has a tapered section where the inner diameter of the housing is gradually reduced in downstream direction of the housing, and wherein a first flexible sealing ring is arranged on the outer surface of the sleeve, such that the inner surface of the tapered section of the housing is pressed against the outer surface of the sealing ring when the sleeve is in the first position thereof, and such that said first sealing ring only loosely engages the tapered section of the housing when the sleeve is in the second position thereof.

30 The tapered section of the sleeve or alternatively of the surrounding housing allows the sleeve to slide easily up and down through the valve housing until the sleeve

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has nearly reached the first position, whereas the surrounding first sealing ring provides a fluid tight seal when the sleeve has reached the first position. Since the sleeve is able to easily slide up and down through the valve housing there is no need to use an additional hydraulic piston as known from US patent No. 5,004,007.

In addition to the first sealing ring a second flexible sealing ring may be arranged in the tubular housing downstream of the first sealing ring, which second sealing ring is configured as a stop for the sleeve when the sleeve is moved in the first position thereof.

Said first and second sealing rings may be made of an elastomeric material and define an sealed annular enclosure in which the flapper valve body and seat are arranged when the sleeve is moved in the first position thereof.

The flapper valve body may be equipped with a spring which biases the valve body towards a closed position and wherein a spring is arranged between the tubular valve body and the valve protection sleeve, which biases the valve protection sleeve towards the second position.

The gas lift flow control device may be configured to be retrievably positioned in a substantially vertical position in a side pocket in the production tubing of an oil well, and the spring which biases the valve protection sleeve towards the second position is configured to collapse if the accumulation of the gravity of the valve protection sleeve and forces exerted by the lift gas to the sleeve exceed a predetermined threshold value.

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Preferably, the spring is configured to collapse when the lift gas injection pressure has reached a value, which is lower than the lift gas injection pressure during normal oil production.

5 It is also preferred that the flapper type valve body comprises a tilted face which is dimensioned such that the point of initial contact by the sleeve when moving from the second position to the first position is at the point farthest away from a hinge pin of the flapper type
10 valve body. This results in less strain on the hinge pin, resulting in longer life and reduced failures due to hinge pin stress and strain.

These and other features, advantages and embodiments of the gas lift method and flow control device according
15 to the invention are described in more detail in the accompanying claims, abstract and detailed description with reference to the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In the accompanying drawings:

20 Fig. 1 is a longitudinal sectional view of a flow control device according to the invention wherein the flapper valve body is in the open position and the valve protection sleeve is in the second position; and

25 Fig. 2 is a longitudinal sectional view of the flow control device of Fig. 1, wherein the flapper valve body is in the closed position and the valve protection sleeve is in the first position.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF A PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

30 Fig. 1 shows a gas lift flow control device comprising a tubular valve housing 1 comprising a longitudinal flow passage 2 in which a flapper type valve body 3 is pivotally arranged such that the valve body 3 can be pivoted between a closed position in which the

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valve body 3 is pressed against a ring-shaped valve seat 4 as shown in Fig.1 and an open position in which the valve body 3 is oriented parallel to the flow passage 2 as shown in Fig.2.

5 A valve protection sleeve 5 is slidably arranged in the valve housing 1 between a first position shown in Fig.2 and a second position, which is shown in Fig.1.

 In the first position shown in Fig.2 the valve is open and the pressure difference across a flow
10 restriction 8 which is mounted inside the sleeve 5 pushes the sleeve 5 up such that the sleeve is pressed against a first and second sealing ring 6 and 7. The pressure difference is caused by the flux of lift gas or other
15 fluids which enters the valve housing via a series of inlet ports 9 and flows up through the flow passage 2 towards a valve outlet opening 10 at the top of the valve, thereby lifting the sleeve 5 up against the action of a spring 11.

 In the second position shown in Fig.1 no lift gas is
20 injected into the flow passage 2, so that there is no pressure difference across the flow restriction 8 and the spring 11 pushes the sleeve 5 down such that the top of the sleeve 5 is below the ring-shaped flapper valve seat 4. The downward movement of the sleeve 5 into the
25 second position permits the flapper valve body 3 to pivot down against the ring-shaped valve seat 4.

 In addition to the spring 11 which serves to move the sleeve 5 into the second position any reverse flow of fluids through the sleeve 11 creates a pressure
30 difference which also exerts force in the direction of moving the sleeve 11 to the second (closed) position. The valve protection sleeve 5 has a tapered upper part, of which the taper angle is selected such that the sleeve 11

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is centralized as it moves toward the first position and that if the sleeve is in the first position shown in Fig.2 the conical outer surface of the sleeve 5 firmly engages the first elastomeric sealing ring 6. The first and second sealing rings 6 and 7 thereby define a sealed annular recess 12 in which the flapper body 3 and ring-shaped valve seat 4 are protected from mechanical and/or chemical erosion stemming from the flow of lift gas through the flow passage 2. When lift gas injection is interrupted the spring 11 pushes the sleeve 5 down and the first sealing ring only loosely engages the tapered outer surface of the valve protection sleeve 5, so that the sleeve smoothly slides towards the second position thereof under the action of the spring tension and its own weight , without requiring additional hydraulic action by means of an additional piston as disclosed in US patent 5,004,007.

Instead of providing the sleeve with a tapered top and mounting the second sealing ring 6 in a recess in the inner wall of the valve housing 1, the second sealing ring 6 could be installed in a recess in the outer wall of a cylindrical sleeve 5, which is surrounded by a tapered section of the valve housing 1.

The valve housing 1 comprises a conical nose section 14 and a series of sealing rings 15 which enable retrievable installation of the valve in a side pocket in a production tubing in the manner as disclosed in US patent No. 5,535,828, such that the inlet ports 9 are connected in fluid communication with the annular space between the production tubing and surrounding well casing, into which space the lift gas is injected from surface, and such that the valve outlet opening 10

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discharges the lift gas into the crude oil stream in the production tubing.

5 The valve outlet opening 10 may comprise a plurality of small gas injection ports or a porous membrane as disclosed in International patent application WO 0183944 though which the lift gas is injected as a stream of finely dispersed bubbles into the crude oil stream, thereby creating a foam or froth type mixture of lift gas and crude oil.

10 The plane of the tilted face 3A of the flapper 3 is not parallel to the plane of the sealing surface of the flapper. The sealing surface of the flapper is designed to fully and simultaneously contact the entire seal surface or valve seat 4 which exists in the body of the
15 flow control device. The sealing face of the flapper and the sealing face in the body of the flow control device are perpendicular to the centerline of the sleeve 5 and are parallel to the face of the sleeve. Since the plane of the tilted face 3A of the flapper 3 is not parallel to
20 the face 5A of the sleeve 5, when the sleeve 5 moves from the second position to the first position, the sleeve 5 contacts one portion of the face 3A of the flapper 3 before it contacts another. The tilted face 3A of the flapper is dimensioned such that the point 3C of initial
25 contact by the sleeve when moving from the second position to the first position is a point 3C farthest away from the hinge pin 3B of the flapper 3. This results in less strain on the hinge pin 3B, resulting in longer life and reduced failures due to hinge pin stress and
30 strain.

The angles of the inlet holes 9 are dimensioned such that the incoming fluids are introduced into the interior 2 of the flow control device with a minimum of

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5 abrupt changes of direction. This minimization of direction changes enables the flow control device to cause more lift gas or other fluids to flow through the flow control device with the same flowing condition as other flow control devices which do not allow for flow with a minimum of flow direction changes. Additionally, the reduction of direction changes of the inflowing fluid reduces the erosion on the flow control device surfaces due to reduced turbulence.